

## CHAPTER IV

### GOOD FRIENDSHIP

#### (*KALYANAMITTATA*)

Social relations comprise another area of daily life that is crucially related to *patibat tham* and thus bears closer examination. The importance of Good Friendship (*Kalyanamittata*) – association with good people – in leading the spiritual life was emphasized in many of the Buddha’s teachings. Although it does not number among the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, it is considered a vital condition for the arising and support for the development of the Path:

Just as, monks, the dawn is the forerunner, the harbinger, of the arising of the sun, so friendship with good people is the forerunner, the harbinger, of the arising of the [Noble] eightfold way (S. V.28, 30 quoted in Payutto 1990: 46).

Much attention is given to the matter of friendship in the ethical teachings for laymen given in the Sigalovada Sutta, where it is mentioned in several ways: association of bad companions as a means of squandering wealth, distinguishing between false and true friends, the friend-friend relationship, and the four bases of social harmony (Ibid: 36).

Good friendship is of great benefit not just at the mundane level, but also for higher spiritual development. A good friend (*kalyanamitta*) can teach, induce, advise, or use other skillful means to help a practitioner in developing mental qualities, practicing, and cultivating *panna* (Ibid: 31). So important is spiritual friendship to development on the Path that the Buddha asserted that it was not merely half of the spiritual life, as suggested by Ananda:

Not so, Ananda! Not so Ananda! This is the entire spiritual life, Ananda, that is, good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship. When a monk has a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path (S. V.2-3 in Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005: 240).

Friendship is stressed not only in the Buddhist teachings, but by *phu patibat tham* themselves. It was striking how all of my informants brought the subject up without any prompting. Naturally, social relations form a key component of daily life and friendship in particular is universally valued as a deeply enriching part of the human experience. What is interesting is that my informants spoke of friendship not only in the regular sense, but with an added spiritual dimension.

The matter of spiritual friendship is another major point of distinction between monks and laypeople. “*Sangha*, ” the word for the order of monks, itself means “community” (Payutto 2546: 349). By ordaining, monks become part of a community of fellow monks, and thus automatically gain access to a set of spiritual friends to support their practice, not only in the literal sense of “live-in” friends at the monastery<sup>1</sup> but also in the larger sense of a network of monastics who are bound together by the Vinaya. Moreover, the kind of practice monks can support each other in is that at the highest level aimed at attaining *nibbana*, as fellow monks – theoretically and at least some in practice – are committed to this goal.

Laypeople, however, do not have a ready-made spiritual community, and must exert extra effort to cultivate spiritual friends and create their own kinds of spiritual communities. Building up such spiritual friendships is particularly important for *phu patibat tham* because they form such a small minority of the general population. Rather than living surrounded by like-minded practitioners as monks do, they are surrounded mostly by people who do not understand their practice and could all too easily pull them off track. As they must swim against the current (*tuan krasae*) of mainstream societal values, banding together with other *phu patibat tham* helps provide the lone practitioner with much-needed strength to continue on the Path. At the same time, another challenge of being a lay *phu patibat tham* is to find ways to handle their social relations, especially with non-practitioners, such that their practice is not weakened yet their friendships are also not strained. How they navigate the complicated social terrain is one of the most colorful aspects of their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Even though monks do not always reside at a temple and sometimes spend part of the year in solitary practice, all monks must take up residence at a temple during the period of the annual rains retreat.

### **Avoiding False Friends**

According to the fundamental pattern of all Buddhist practice, the first step is to avoid evil – in this case, “evil” friends. Indeed, the first clause of the 38 Highest Blessings (*Mangala 38*), which is one important set of Buddhist guidelines for living a good life, is to dissociate from the wicked (*bala-asevana*). A related teaching is the Buddha’s delineation of four kinds of false friends: the out-and-out robber, the smooth talker, the flatterer, and the one who leads others to ruin (see Payutto 1996: 67-69 for more detail). The last category – comprised of companions in drinking, debauchery, frequenting shows and fairs, and gambling – is perhaps the most clearly recognizable class of friends to stay clear of. A broader way to conceive of this type of “wicked” or “false” friend is one who invites you to break the precepts.

Indeed, my informants reported that one of the first changes they made in their social relationships after beginning to *patibat tham* was to drop precept-breaking activities they used to enjoy with friends – or, to drop the friends themselves if it was impossible to spend time with them without breaking the precepts.

Common forms of socializing often run up against two precepts – those concerning addictive substances and wrong speech. What happens when their friends go off to clubs or parties, but *phu patibat tham* can’t drink or smoke? What happens when their companions’ lunchtime chitchat mainly consists of gossip, sarcasm, and idle chatter, all forms of wrong speech?

As these activities form such a central part of mainstream social interactions, in many cases the new *phu patibat tham* reacts by withdrawing socially, which can also cause them to feel alienated and lonely.

Thep recalls of his high school days in England, “I just lost myself in my world for a while. I had this ‘Iron Clad Rule’ about not drinking a drop of alcohol. It was hard, especially when everyone else did. I had to be the only one who’s not doing it. But I have never regretted this. Most of the time. Yes, sometimes, I did feel a bit sad.” He pauses, betraying a glimmer of wistfulness, but carries on in a resolute tone, “But afterwards I felt relieved. Even though I didn’t have many friends

and people would view me as odd, I thought I had escaped teenage years I didn't want. At least I don't have to bear the karmic consequences of what my peers did – they wasted their teen years drinking a lot and doing drugs.”

Ko similarly went through a phase of alienation. Those around her felt she was different from them – strange, actually. And she herself felt she was different – a bit better, actually. Indeed, like Thep, she took some pride in being different, her sense of alienation mixed with a tinge of superiority. In her early months of *patibat tham*, she took it extremely seriously, very intent to walk, move, and eat slowly in an effort to maintain *sati*. Friends at work noticed and wondered, sometimes even asking her, if she'd become a bit weird (*pian*). When she sat quietly at the lunch table, they'd tease her, “Oh, are you eating ‘mindfully’ now?” In actuality, she was also struggling to maintain the precept on right speech. “When they talked, it was mostly gossiping about other people or making jibes at them. I couldn't join in. So I just stayed quiet.”

Moreover, she continues, “I felt they didn't understand me. But that was ok, because I'm wasn't interested in their way of life. I felt in order to go into their world, I'd have to compromise myself. But I'd rather *patibat*. So I just chose to distance myself from them.”

Even if they did not withdraw so completely or feel such a severe sense of alienation, when a *phu patibat tham* moves to adopt a more dhammic lifestyle, they still experience conflicts with existing friends and their established patterns of socializing. This is especially the case if their previous lifestyle was particularly at odds with dhammic morality. Daeng, before beginning to *patibat tham*, was a full-out “party girl.” She said, “Since I started university [at 17-18], I used to go out a lot, often three days a week. I drank a lot. A lot!” After she started to *patibat tham*, she tried to kick the habit, but in the early years there was some overlap between her new moral lifestyle and the vestiges of her old life. This contradiction was a bit confusing to her – and her friends. “I used to go to Wat Patum to meditate after work, and then right afterwards I would go next door to the World Trade Center beer garden to meet up with friends.”

“Or another time, I was reading a dhamma book with one hand while holding a cigarette with the other. My friends were like, ‘Geez! So what are you? Choose



one thing or the other!” The problem was, when she chose to go the dhammic route and stop drinking, some party buddies resisted. “They’d tease me, saying ‘What are you, a nun?’ Or when we went out to eat, some would keep trying to convince me to drink.”

Reflecting back on those early days, Daeng says, “I did feel conflicted. But I think most people who *patibat tham* have to go through this phase. We have to manage to get past it.”

Indeed, to lesser or greater extent, all my informants did meet some degree of social conflicts. With regard to social drinking, those who started to *patibat* when they were older, in their 30’s, like Noi and Fai were past the age of partying anyway so were less affected by peer pressure, although Noi did have to contend with a wine-drinking culture when living in Europe. An unusual case is that of Waew. Despite her youth, twenty-something Waew was not much troubled by the drinking issue because she wasn’t the type to go out at night much anyway, characterizing herself as “proper” (*riap roi*) rather than “sassy” (*sa*). However, when it comes to maintaining right speech in social situations, all faced challenges, regardless of age or personality, as gossip is rampant in society.

Just as the level of social conflict each person felt differed, ranging from awkwardness to extreme alienation, so did the way each person chose to deal with it. Thep and Ko, after an initial period of being very strict in their *patibat* and consequently feeling alienated, eased off on what they felt was overly extreme behavior to re-engage socially. Thep recounts that in the beginning, when he was twelve, he not only swore off alcohol but also sensual entertainment, inspired by the seventh precept. But after a while he decided to relax and do what “normal people do,” watching movies and going to dances again. “I became less extreme about being a nonconformist. I wanted to fit in.” As part of his relaxation in stringency, he even went through a period of teenage rebellion and experimentation with alcohol. It was brief, however, and he then resumed his hard line on alcohol. “I never drank a drop of alcohol after that. The ‘Iron-Clad Rule’ came down again.” Today, some of his friends do “make a big deal about my not drinking and think I’m overly puritanical.” But he is not concerned by it and carries on in his ways.

Ko similarly swung back from one extreme to the other before finding her way back to a middle ground. After a few months of what she calls her “robot stage,” she started to feel lonely. “I had no friends!” she recalls with amusement. “So I went back in the direction of worldliness (*lokiya*). And once I fell out of it [otherworldliness], I *really* fell out of it! I got completely lost in worldly affairs.”

Now, her attitude has changed. “Before I felt I had to choose either way – worldly or not. Now, I don’t view it quite like that anymore. So now I try to make myself natural and easy-going. Now, when people are talking and gossiping, I do join in. Have I become too lax? Maybe. But at least I’m more aware of it [right speech] – I do try to think before I speak, do try to look at my intention. Your conscience will tell you what is wrong speech.” She laughs sheepishly, “But sometimes I still say it. Sometimes I lose out to my defilements (*kilesa*).”

Figuring out what the middle path is – and managing to stick to it – is not easy. Ko admits, “I’m still trying to figure it out. Now, I don’t try to separate between the worldly world and the *patibat dhamma* world. But I still wonder, ‘Are there some areas where the two really can’t go together?’ Right now, I’m still exploring and adjusting.”

### **Associating with Good Friends**

Some informants avoid a stark separation between the otherworldly and the worldly, between their *patibat tham* and their previously existing lives, by maintaining old friendships. For them, taking up *patibat tham* certainly did not necessitate dropping all old friends who did not *patibat*. The only major change was curtailing precept-breaking activities with some friends. But even that didn’t require relinquishing those friends entirely, with the concept of “false friends” proving more complicated in practice. Those who may indulge in some precept-breaking social activities are not necessarily seen as completely wicked friends. Many informants believed that, so long as their friends who may drink or gossip didn’t insist on them joining in their vices, they may have redeeming qualities and still be considered good friends. Thus, there may not be such a clear divide between avoiding “false friends” and moving on to the next step of cultivating “true” or “good friends.” Daeng, for

example, may no longer go drinking with her old partying crowd, but she keeps up the friendships by doing other activities with them such as going out to eat or playing sports.

If there may be some overlap between who is considered a “false” friend and who is considered a “true” or “good” friend, what matters most in deciding whether or not someone is a “good friend”?

According to the Buddhist conception, the good friend (*kalyanamitta*) has seven qualities:

1. Lovable; endearing (*Piyo*)
2. Respectable; venerable (*Garu*)
3. Adorable; cultured; emulable (*Bhavaniyo*)
4. Being a counsellor (*Vatta ca*)
5. Being a patient listener (*Vacanakkhamo*)
6. Able to deliver deep discourses or to treat profound subjects  
(*Gambhiranca katham katta*)
7. Never exhorting groundlessly; not leading or spurring on to a useless end  
(*No catthane niyojaye*)  
(Payutto 2546: 204)

While none of my informants actually reeled off this list, their discussion of good friends nonetheless reflected these ideas. For most, it is not a requirement that close friends also *patibat tham*. Rather, they focus on more fundamental considerations such as whether the friends are good to them, understand them, or just “click” with their personality. Pok said that his closest friend from his university days was not in fact one friend who *patibat tham*, but another one who didn’t, simply because her playful personality matched his better.

Years of shared history are also deeply cherished. One of my talks with Fai was at her friend’s apartment, which she had generously offered as a space for Fai’s yoga class with her new *patibat tham* friends, even though she herself did not *patibat tham* and was not part of that circle. Gesturing at the room, Fai said emphatically, “This friend I’ve had since childhood. We grew up together, we know each other so well. No matter what, we will always be friends!”

Ko shares similar sentiments, pointing out that one has different friends for different purposes, whom one connects with in different ways. Now past her segregationist early days, she said, “I can be friends with anybody. There are many

kinds of friends and many kinds of closeness. My dearest friend is an old friend from school days. She doesn't have to *patibat tham*. When we talk, it's entirely about silly things (*rueang rai sara*)!"

However, they do set a basic requirement that their close friends have good morals, regardless of whether they *patibat tham*. They could be of a different religion, as long as they are moral people, as in the case of Waew and Fai's Christian friends. Waew smiles, "My Christian friends from my convent school days even read the dhamma book I wrote." Or they could even be irreligious, such as Ko's good friend, who is still "very worldly and seems completely uninterested in religion, yet maintains a very high ethical standard."

Beyond having good morals, an interest in questions of life philosophy and human psychology also makes for compatibility, even if the friend's interest may not stem from Buddhism per se. Pok tells of his best friend, who isn't explicitly interested in dhamma but is the type who will forward him philosophical emails and magazine articles. In admiring tones, he says his friend may in fact be more innately dhammic in his approach to life. "This friend isn't extremely pious (*thama thamo*) but he is more calm, peaceful, and happy than me. He can accept anything in life. I'm always the one who's stressed out and asking him for advice. It's rarely the other way around."

### **Cultivating Dhamma Friends**

Ultimately, however, once a person starts to *patibat tham* and the spiritual dimension of their life gains in importance, do they need to have some friends with whom they can connect on a spiritual level? The Buddha taught that in selecting one's friends, conversation with those who are one's equal in *sila*, *samadhi*, and *panna* on these subjects is conducive to mutual profit and comfort. Moreover, those who are one's superior should be followed and treated with reverence as one would thereby improve one's own virtue and understanding (Saddhatissa 1970: 102).

While *phu patibat tham* can still remain close with an old friend, unless their friend is also in touch with spirituality, there is a whole part of their life they cannot quite share with that friend nor can that friend help them specifically with regard to



their spiritual practice. To fulfill that need, they may want to develop a set of friends who also *patibat tham*, or dhamma friends (*phuean thang tham*).

Few of my informants had any existing friends who were interested in dhamma. Waew was a rare example of someone who did have a few childhood friends who were. Like hers, her friends' families emphasized *patibat tham*, and between eighth and eleventh grades, she would go with one or two friends once a year to do a seven-day meditation retreat. When I expressed my amazement at her having dhamma-oriented friends from such a young age, she says, "I think it was just my karma to have those friends." Apparently, karma can beat the odds in some cases. Nonetheless, most of her friends, especially during her university days, were bewildered when she raised spiritual questions. She recounts, "When I was in high school, I asked 'Why are we born?' My friends said I thought too much (*kid mak*). When I was in university and asked again, my friends said I was weird." So she still felt there were some things she couldn't talk to friends about.

Indeed, the younger the informant, the more out of tune with their peers they tended to be. Like Waew, Pok started asking big existential questions early in life, in his case at the even younger age of nine. It's not surprising he found few like-minded friends. "If I ever talked about stuff like that, they'd start teasing me, calling me 'Venerable Father' (*Luang Pho*). So I just stopped talking about it." Even now in his mid-twenties, he says laughingly, "none of my close friends now are interested in *patibat tham*. None at all!"

As they get older, however, it is possible their friends will also turn towards dhamma. Daeng found that even though during university none of her friends paid any attention to dhamma, some did become interested later in life. "As they experienced more of life and encountered some disappointments, they started to be attracted to it. In fact, some became curious after I began to *patibat tham*. They saw that I became happier, and wanted to know how." Fai also has a few ex-Catholic friends who, like her, began to question Catholicism as they got older, and started to *patibat tham*. She says, "after they started to *patibat*, we became closer." When old friends also start to *patibat*, it can help solve the dilemma of maintaining old friends while still developing friends with whom one can relate on a dhammic level.

However, if existing friends remain uninterested, many choose to cultivate new friends. Ko, for all her enjoyment of “silly” conversations with her old friend and insistence that she “can be friends with anyone,” nonetheless has built up a considerable number of new dhamma friends. She has met many through activities with Buddhist groups.<sup>2</sup> When she speaks of them, her face lights up with enthusiasm. “With these friends, we can speak at the spiritual level, talk about things in that language. We do talk about other things too; it’s not like some kind of ‘spiritual book club.’ But it is different from how I talk with my other friends, who don’t all have this spiritual bent.”

Of my informants, Mi is the one who is most intent on focusing on friends who have an interest in dhamma. Unlike others, she is not very interested in maintaining old friends who do not *patibat tham*. She says, “After you change, [become more into dhamma], the people you choose to spend time with also changes. The old friends you had...If you’re going to keep interacting, they have to change too so you can keep on being friends. If they don’t change and also come this direction (*naew*), we can no longer ‘tune’ ourselves to each other. They will still be friends, but more distant. They slowly fade out. Then there are new people who come in who can go with my new inclination (*jarit*). My friends now are mostly new.”

In Mi’s case, because she was more pronounced in her disinterest in non-dhammic friends, she felt greater social alienation, which went beyond the matter of avoiding precept-breaking friends and reflected what she considered an untenable clash in fundamental worldviews. To her, socializing with people who were solely concerned with worldly affairs was dull, even pointless. She said, with a bored expression on her face, “Talking about other people, who did what, whose child got into college, who’s getting married to whom, who expanded their business...I feel their world is just nonsense (*rai sara*). It feels like they’re just wasting each breath of air they take, wasting each day of their lives. So I don’t know what to talk to them about. I can’t be with them.”

Her firm convictions did not develop, however, without some internal strife. She may now draw such a sharp distinction between herself and non-dhammic peers

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Buddhist groups like the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM), Putthika, and Sangha of Mindfulness or spiritual groups like Chit Wiwat.

precisely because she has tried in the past to blend in with them, and failed. “I did want to change at first. I did want to be ‘normal.’ My parents expected me to just be like other kids and join the ‘hi-so’ (high society) set in Phuket. But I’m just not like them. I just couldn’t do it. When I first went back to Phuket, I couldn’t find anyone I could talk with. I felt like I had no friends at all. So I did feel like being ‘strange’ (*plaek*) comes with a high cost! But I guess I have felt strange for a long time now, throughout my life.” Mi says this with a laugh, but her quiet voice hints at the sadness that being different “cost” her.

Her feeling of not belonging was probably intensified by the smallness of Phuket society. Bangkok, where she comes periodically for her studies, has a larger, more diversified population, and here she has had an easier time carving a dhammic niche. Ironically enough, it is in Bangkok’s more frenetic urban setting where she has found social solace. Her Ph.D program in Buddhist studies at Mahachulalongkorn University is naturally a fecund ground for meeting like-minded friends. Among her new friends is a professor who had previously been a monk. She says “It’s good to talk to him because he knows a lot about Pali, the scriptures, the *Visuittimagha*. Even when we talk about other things, we can always relate it back to the *Visuittimagha*!” Amusingly, she tosses in the arcane reference as if it were the most normal topic of conversation. It certainly is to her and her friend.

For most of my other informants, it is fortunately not too difficult to develop dhamma friends. In fact, interestingly, many informants all reported being able to develop close friendships very rapidly with other spiritually inclined people.

One night I went to dinner with Ko and some of her friends from the Chit Wiwat (referred to in English as “New Consciousness”) movement, a group engaged in activities to promote greater public discourse on spiritual matters. I found a warm camaraderie between them, the conversation filled with good-natured ribbing and frank discussions of personal experiences. I was surprised to find out that she had only been introduced to them less than six months ago. When I marveled at how close and comfortable they seemed with each other, Ko mused, “With other friends I may have a lot of shared memories and history, which I obviously don’t with these friends, because they’re new. But because our bond is based on our sharing a spiritual approach to life, we could develop quality friendships in a short time.”

It is not simply a matter of being able to talk about spiritual matters with them. More profoundly, Ko says, “It’s a deep kind of friendship, with a special quality. I’ve never experienced this before. Because everyone does spiritual practice, when we interact or touch each other, we do so in a deep, profound way. We all practice deep listening.’ We are non-judgmental. There is a high degree of trust.”

I could see the quick development of friendship in a span of even fewer months when it came to Fai. Early last year she mentioned how she had recently struck up a friendship with a journalist who had interviewed her about her recently published dhamma book. A mere two months later, the two had started taking a yoga class together and going about town together. (The third member of the yoga class in fact was Ko. Unbeknownst to me, Ko and Fai knew each other, although I had gotten to know them in separate contexts. This was a testament to the small and interconnected world of *phu patibat tham*). When I sat in on their yoga class a few times and had lunch with them, Fai and her new buddy would be giggling like school girls.

Ko attributed their easy and quickly-developed intimacy to their shared Buddhist practice. “We both share the same approach to life, simple and easy-going (*ngai ngai*). There’s no pretense. And because we’re on the same path and share the same language, it’s easy to understand each other.”

Indeed, in yoga class and afterwards during lunch, the three – Fai’s friend, Fai, and Ko – would often talk about their *patibat tham* experiences, exchanging stories, frustrations, and views. Contrary to what most people, myself included, might have imagined, these conversations were not made in hushed, pious tones suitable for such a lofty topic. After all, *patibat tham* is just a normal part of their everyday lives. So when hanging out and talking about it, they simply seemed to be having lots of fun together.

Yet in some ways, it did seem like a special brand of fun. Dhammic fun. Often their jokes had a dhammic angle, with allusions to Buddhist ideas. Or, they would indulge in some dhammic “gossip.” Over one lunch, Ko exclaimed, “Ooh, I have a really fun story to tell!” The “fun story” turned out to be about a “Deep Ecology Retreat” another friend of Ko’s had gone to. She recounted excitedly, “They were able to communicate with nature spirits. And there was this one woman who said she was able to talk to the Rice Goddess (*Mae Pho Sop*). She was mischievous



and asked, ‘So is it true that the Ramkhamhaeng inscription was faked?’ She said yes! Then she even asked, ‘What would happen to the prime minister’ [at that point facing public rallies calling for his ouster]?’” Everyone laughed heartily. Even when discussing rather unusual topics, *phu patibat tham* do not seem to find them the least bit bizarre. Because they are steeped in spiritual concerns, they are used to thinking about and enjoy talking about reincarnation, different planes of existence, non-human life forms like spirits (*phi*) and heavenly beings (*thewada*), and other supernatural matters.

In the course of conversation, they would also sometimes speak of otherworldly concepts like samsara or *nibbana*, and even profound experiences wherein they realized the illusory nature of the world, all without skipping a beat or batting a lash. They certainly had the shared vocabulary and worldview with which to comfortably do so. As Fai said, “It’s fun to be able to talk about dhamma with friends like this. It’s a more absorbing kind of fun than typical fun activities like going to a concert or whatever. We can talk at a deeper level. ”

Daeng also distinguishes between regular fun and fun with a dhammic twist. “Before, whenever there was a long weekend I always used to have to go out of town or out of the country. Now, I’d rather spend the time going to retreats. Or even if I go on a holiday trip, if I go with my dhamma friends, at least we’ll be able to talk about dhamma sometimes, or do some dhamma activities like meditating in the morning or stopping by a wat together.”

Daeng is an example of a *phu patibat tham* who has developed a tight group of dhamma friends. As she puts it, we “clump together.” In addition to taking combined leisure-dhamma trips, she and her dhamma friends sometimes organize and hold private retreats together, using someone’s home, and often go together to visit their teacher. I went along with her and a vanload of her friends on one such visit, which felt partly like a fun outing with a bunch of buddies.

### **Specialized Meaning of “*Kalyanamitta*”**

Of her dhamma friends, Daeng says, “We help each other as we walk together. We serve as *kalyanamitta* for each other.” Indeed, there is a more specialized

meaning of the term “*kalyanamitta*” (*kalayanamit* in Thai) beyond just “good friend.” When *phu patibat tham* speak of “*kalyanamitta*”, they mean more precisely spiritual friends who help them on their dhammic journey. *Kalyanamitta* can be immensely beneficial in providing support, encouragement, and advice in *patibat tham*. All my informants spoke of the importance of cultivating such friends to help keep them on the Path. Waew believes that because the “worldly forces (*krasae loke*) are strong,” it is extremely valuable, or even necessary, to have *kalayanamitta* to help pull her in “the way of dhamma” (*thang tham*).

While Ko, Fai, and Daeng told of dhamma friends who became very close, “*kalyanamitta*” is a wider term that can encompass people who aren’t necessarily friends one socializes with or keep in frequent touch with. There is a more open-minded understanding of what qualifies as a *kalyanamitta* in this sense. It can refer to any fellow traveler who has helped you along the Path, or may in the future.

Pok, for instance, considers his professor from his master’s degree program to be an important *kalyanamitta*. She invited him to join the weekly group meditation sitting at the Chulalongkorn Thamasathan when he was a student, and still periodically calls him about opportunities to help serve at programs held by the Foundation for the Promotion of Vipassana Meditation that she is an active member of. While the weekly sittings were not social events – “there was a big age difference between me and the other professors, so it’s not like we all went out to dinner afterwards or anything” – he says they provided valuable opportunities for talking about dhamma (*sonthana tham*) and, very importantly, people who would “help keep me in the dhamma ‘circles’ (*waed wong*).”

A professor-student relationship may not amount to buddy status, but still reflects some level of acquaintanceship. Yet, it can take a lot less familiarity for two people to strike up and maintain a *kalyanamitta* relationship. Even without knowing each other that well, just knowing someone is a fellow *phu patibat tham* is enough to form a bond. What distinguishes these *kalyanamitta* from other kinds of casually formed acquaintances is the sincerity and goodwill that emerges spontaneously. Newly acquainted *kalyanamitta* freely trade contact information and promptly start sending SMS or email messages to each other about dhamma talks, retreats, and merit-making opportunities.

How are these connections made? Whereas in the past, a person may simply get to know other dhamma-oriented people through the local community or activities at the local temple, today retreats and public events like lectures and seminars on Buddhism have become the prime avenues for “networking” and making new dhamma contacts. One’s network can also be widened by meeting various friends of friends who are linked in interconnecting “dhamma circles” or friendship groups. In this way, a person can develop a diverse set of *kalyanamitta* – from friends who *patibat tham* in the same school to those from other schools of practice, from friends of the same age group to those generation(s) removed, from very close friends to looser ones.

A truly modern development is the emergence of online dhamma communities, which a few of my informants link into. For instance, the Sangha of Mindfulness (*Sangha Haeng Sati*), which began as a real live group of practitioners who met at a Plum Village retreat, also started a blog ([sanghaofmindfulness.blogspot.com](http://sanghaofmindfulness.blogspot.com)) and group email list in 2003. Through these media, other interested parties can join the group, participate in on-line discussions, read electronically posted dhamma teachings, be apprised of group news, and get acquainted with other members over the web even without having met in the flesh. They can of course always move on to live interactions by joining in actual group activities. Oftentimes when there are group events held outside Bangkok, there are messages that are posted to the email list arranging carpools, which provides an opportunity for virtually connected members to physically meet and go together. Conversely, the online forum allows members who have occasionally met in real life to deepen their connection over the internet, especially useful given how logistically difficult it is for all members to meet regularly. For instance, after one of the monthly group practice sessions, Ko wrote a reflection piece about it and shared it on the email list, which continued the “spiritual dialogue” among the small number who attended as well as spreading it to the larger group. There are currently over 170 members in the email group.

Another online community is based on the website Larn Dham ([www.larndham.net](http://www.larndham.net)), which was started in 1998 as a web discussion board by a small group of people who already knew each other and wanted an online forum where they

could discuss dhamma. Through word of mouth, the discussion board's popularity grew exponentially and today it is a huge portal where hundreds of people of all ages and professional backgrounds interested in dhamma converge. On the discussion boards, members – including lay dhamma teachers and monks – post and answer questions about dhamma and *patibat tham*. In addition, there is a calendar where information about events and meditation retreats at various venues throughout the country is posted. As stated on the website, the forum is geared to serve those who are seriously interested in dhamma, particularly *phu patibat tham* who seek to “gain *panna*”, “*patibat tham* according to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (*Satipatthana 4*)” and “to gain true liberation from suffering.” Indicating the overlapping nature of these online groups, many of the members of the Sangha of Mindfulness are also members of Larn Dham.

Indeed, modern communications technology has made it easier to connect to a larger number and wider range, including geographic, of people interested in dhamma, make friends, and sustain contact with them. There is now a whole new world of online *kalyanamitta*.

### **Higher Meaning of “Kalyanamitta”**

Online or otherwise, the community of spiritual friends extends not only horizontally, through friendships among peers traveling the same path, but also vertically, through the relationship between teachers and students (Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005: 225). In a higher meaning of the term “*kalyanamitta*”, monks and other dhamma teachers can also be considered spiritual friends. They embody most admirably the sixth quality of the *kalyanamitta*, that of being “able to deliver deep discourses or to treat profound subjects” and provide disciples with precious expert guidance in their practice.

Many of my informants did speak of their teachers as being their *kalyanamitta*. The one who took the idea furthest was Mi, who even considered eminent monks who have already passed away as her *kalyanamitta*. She believes that friendships with peers, even with those who are also working seriously towards *nibbana*, cannot help her that significantly in walking the path. The only kind of



*kalyanamitta* she thinks can truly help her are “those who have already made it out of *samsara*.” She names Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Achan Cha as her *kalyanamitta*, because they have “shown her the way” and provide inspiring examples that strengthen her confidence and resolve.

Ultimately, the very highest *kalyanamitta* is the Buddha himself. As he once said:

...by relying upon me as a good friend, Ananda, beings subject to birth are freed from birth; beings subject to aging are freed from aging, beings subject to death are freed from death, beings subject to sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection, and despair are freed from sorrow, lamentation, pain, dejection and despair. By this method, Ananda it may be understood how the entire spiritual life is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship.” (S. V.2-3 in Bhikkhu Bodhi 2005: 241).